



MILAN CHUCKOVICH/The Columbian

A van, over the center line, illustrates how the narrow bridge makes a tight squeeze for two vehicles.

## Old bridge replacement date in 1991

By BOB BECK  
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WASHOUGAL — The days are numbered for one of Washington's oldest and most dangerous highway bridges.

Unfortunately for state Highway 140 motorists, however, that number is fairly large.

"The Department of Transportation does not intend to replace the 17th Street Bridge for more than two years," said William L. Pierce, engineer for the state highway agency. "Our schedule calls for advertising for bids in November 1991."

The proposed construction is so far in the future, Pierce said, that no design plans have yet been made.

The narrow and battered box-girder bridge spans the Washougal River at the north city limits on 17th Street. Although it is just outside the city, Washougal Police

Chief Rich Williams has responded to many accidents there.

"Just the replacement value of mirrors alone knocked off trucks by the narrow girders would pay for a new bridge," Williams said with a laugh. "The vehicle path is far too narrow and the height is a foot below normal. Just last week another log truck banged into them. There's no question this is a dangerous bridge."

A tape measure shows why the 66-year-old bridge, built during the era of Model-T Fords, is ill-suited to the heavy volume of log trucks and other vehicles that travel it daily. The lanes measure just eight feet from the center line to the edges of the rusty green girders, which are dented and scraped from six decades of collisions.

When heavily loaded trucks roar across, the bridge jumps and trembles like an aspen in a high

wind. The bridge sits on piers created of round rocks hand-molded into concrete, possibly around the turn of the century. The roadbed itself is composed of 8-by-3 inch boards set on edge and covered with a thin veneer of asphalt.

Although the bridge can accommodate two-way traffic if drivers are cautious, many motorists stop at the edge, afraid to venture out until the structure is cleared of all oncoming traffic. School buses cross with caution lights flashing and tall trucks go right down the middle, taking up both lanes.

Adding to the anxiety of drivers is a tight S-curve leading to the south approach of the bridge, put there for no apparent reason. Leon Higginson, who with his two sons owns and operates an auto repair shop adjacent to the bridge, has no idea why the bridge approach was not built in a straight line.

Higginson walks behind his shop. There through the woods is the distinct outline of the old horse-and-buggy road, dating back more than 100 years, before there ever was a bridge and travelers had to ford the river. This road was straight.

Dolphe Gilbreath is the granddaughter of C.W. Cottrell, the power pioneer who operated a series of dams on the river beginning in 1897. His first dam, originally to turn the stones of a grist mill and eventually to supply the first electricity to Camas and Washougal in about 1910, was located just a few feet upstream from the bridge.

Gilbreath was born near her present home and in 1923 was looking out the window when the bridge collapsed beneath the weight of a gravel truck, killing or injuring several people.